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The Last Roman Emperor, the Mahdī, and Jerusalem

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Introduction

In a fourth-century Christian apocalyptic text called the *Tiburtine Sibyl*,² a Greek king is depicted. This is not your regular king, however. Rather, he is an eschatological figure who fights the battles of the end of days. As Stephen Shoemaker sums up the text's contents:

A Greek emperor named Constans will rise up over the Greeks and the Romans and devastate pagans and their temples, executing those who refuse conversion. Toward the end of his long reign the Jews will convert, at which point the Antichrist will appear and the peoples of Gog and Magog will break loose. The emperor will vanquish them with his army, after which he will travel to Jerusalem and lay down his diadem and robes, relinquishing authority to God. The Antichrist then will briefly reign, sitting in the House of the Lord in Jerusalem. Before long, however, the Lord will send the Archangel Michael to defeat him, thus preparing the way for the Second Coming.³

Already in this early Christian apocalypse,⁴ many of the motifs that reappear later are present: an eschatological figure that is not Jesus but his harbinger; the surge of Gog and Magog; the second coming of Jesus; the Antichrist, who will be defeated in Jerusalem. These motifs will be reused in the seventh-century Christian apocalyptic, even if the enemies of the believers are no longer the pagans but the Muslims. Even more interesting is that the same motifs were then borrowed by the Muslims, who began to narrate, and eventually collect in books, apocalyptic accounts in the eighth–ninth centuries. Of course, in the Muslim apocalyptic texts, the signs and the events of the end of times are reinterpreted.

The wars of the early seventh century and the Christian end of times

The decades before the Islamic conquests were characterized by the renewal of hostilities between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires in various instances, the last war occurring in

¹ I thank Profs. Antti Laato and Serafim Seppälä for comments on the presentation on which this article is based during the workshop at Åbo Akademi. Prof. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila read an earlier draft of this article. I am very grateful to him for his suggestions.

² The original was written in Greek, but the text mainly circulated in Latin translation, see Ernst Sackur, *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen: Pseudomethodius, Adso und die tiburtinische Sibylle* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1898) 117–187; Paul J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967).

³ Stephen J. Shoemaker, “‘The Reign of God Has Come’: Eschatology and Empire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam,” *Arabica* 61 (2014) 514–558, here 542.

⁴ For Christian eschatological thought and writings before the seventh century, see Brian Daley, “Eschatology in the Early Church Fathers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, (ed. Jerry L. Walls; Oxford: OUP, 2008) 91–109.

the years 603–630 CE. The inaptly named “Endless Peace” treaty of 561 between the empires had come to an end when the Byzantine emperor Justin II reopened hostilities in the year 572. The fighting between the Byzantine and Sasanian sides was indecisive, however. The Arab clients of the Persians (Lakhmids and Ṭayyi’) and the Byzantines (Ghassānids) also conducted proxy wars against each other.⁵

In the 610s things started to change. During the reign of Khosrow II (590–628), the Persian armies advanced westward, conquering Syria, Egypt, and many cities of Asia Minor. Jerusalem was reduced in 614 and the True Cross taken, alongside the patriarch, to Ctesiphon, the Persian capital. The loss of land, goods, and prestige was a serious blow to the Byzantine Empire.⁶

The Byzantine Empire started to recover and launch counterattacks in the 620s during the reign of Heraclius (r. 610–641). This did not stop the Persians from once threatening Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, in 626. But soon the Persians’ fortunes turned. Forming an alliance with the Turks, Heraclius attacked Persian lands decisively, which made the Persian king sue for peace in 629. The True Cross was recovered and taken back to Jerusalem in the year 630: Heraclius himself went to restore the Cross to Golgotha. The deeds of Heraclius were seen as having eschatological significance: he reflected the Greek king of the *Tiburtine Sibyl*.⁷ After this, the Sasanian Empire fell into disarray, with different factions and pretenders to the throne fighting each other. When the early Muslims started to launch raids and conquer the Near East in the 630s, the resistance from the Byzantines and Persians was not strong enough to stop them and, in the case of Sasanian Persia, the whole empire collapsed.

The loss of Jerusalem and the True Cross as well as its restoration by Heraclius influenced Syriac and Greek apocalyptic texts written by the Christians of the Near East. This was seen as a monumental affair with eschatological significance. Clearly, according to many apocalyptists, the end was nigh. The feeling was intensified when the Muslim conquests began after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad (632 CE). Around the year 637, the Muslims conquered Jerusalem. The Christians living within and outside the caliphate entertained hopes that Jerusalem would be reconquered by the Christians, more precisely the Byzantines. Many of them thought that the reconquest of Jerusalem and slaying of the Muslims would usher in the end of times or be part of the eschatological battles.

The apocalyptic figure, often referred to in the scholarly literature as the Last Roman Emperor or the King of the Greeks,⁸ re-emerged in Christian literature during and after these events.⁹ The character lived on in eschatological and other literature throughout the

⁵ For the events just before and during the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, see Ilkka Lindstedt, “Early Muslims, Pre-Islamic Arabia, and ‘Pagans,’” in *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam* (ed. Herbert Berg; London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁶ Shoemaker, “The Reign of God,” 537–538.

⁷ Shoemaker, “The Reign of God,” 538–539.

⁸ “Last Roman Emperor” and “King of the Greeks” are used in this article interchangeably.

⁹ As stated above, the Last Roman Emperor character had an earlier precursor in the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, and possibly other texts; see Shoemaker, “The Reign of God,” 541–545.

middle ages. The legend has been examined by Paul Alexander,¹⁰ but here we will focus on the possible dependence of the Muslim eschatological figure(s) on the King of the Greeks.¹¹

The *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius

The most important King of the Greeks apocalypse was the *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius, written towards the end of the seventh century in Syriac¹² and soon translated into Greek and Latin.¹³ On the basis of a passage in which Pseudo-Methodius appears to allocate seventy years (ten weeks of years) as the length of the Arabs' rule,¹⁴ it has been suggested that the work was written between 685–692 CE, or even more precisely in 690 or 691.¹⁵ This would coincide with the second Muslim *fitna*, civil war, that occurred in 680–692.¹⁶ Thus, the second *fitna* would then serve as the context and the historical outlook of Pseudo-Methodius: he had witnessed the civil war that the Muslims had been engulfed in and that had aroused his (and other Christians') hopes that the Muslim polity was collapsing.¹⁷ During the second *fitna*, plague broke out as well and famine was rampant.

¹⁰ Paul J. Alexander, "The Medieval Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and Its Messianic Origin," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978) 1–15; Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 151–184.

¹¹ When this article was more or less completed, I became aware of Ofer Livne-Kafri, "Is there a Reflection of the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius in Muslim Tradition?" *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 56 (2006) 108–119. Livne-Kafri probes many of the same themes as I do here, but with somewhat different results. Most importantly, he does not compare the Last Roman Emperor to the Mahdī.

¹² Anastasios Lolos (ed.), *Die Apokalypse des Ps.-Methodios* (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1976). There is a new English translation of the Syriac text by Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2015) 108–129. On the work see especially Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*; G. J. Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius: A Concept of History in Response to the Rise of Islam," in *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992) 149–187.

¹³ The Greek and Latin versions have been edited and translated into English by Benjamin Garstad, *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius [&] An Alexandrian World Chronicle* (DOML 14; Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Muslims themselves also circulated reports in which it was said that their rule would come to an end after 60–73 years; Suliman Bashear, "Muslim Apocalypses and the Hour: A Case-Study in Traditional Interpretation," *Israel Oriental Studies* 13 (1993) 75–99, here 88. For the canonical Hadiths on the question, see A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: Brill, 1943), II 398b. It is unclear what the direction of borrowing of this idea was.

¹⁵ Sebastian Brock, "Syriac Sources for Seventh-Century History," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 2 (1976) 17–36, here 34.

¹⁶ Reinink, "Ps.-Methodius," 150 n. 2, 178–181. Later Muslim civil wars, e.g., the fourth *fitna* (809–813 CE or longer), also raised Christian hopes of the collapse of the caliphate. In the *Apocalypse of Sergius Bahira* it is prophesied as follows: "When these [seven 'Abbāsīd kings] will have ruled and died, know that the kingdom of the son of Hāshim will be ended. Then the sons of Ishmael will awake, as if from a sleep [cf. Psalm 78:65]. They will fight with one another and everyone will say of himself: 'I am the king.' They will have leave from God [to do this] and he will incite them against each other so that their end and their destruction will be from and by themselves." Translated in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997) 275.

¹⁷ Reinink ("Ps.-Methodius," 186) states that the "real problem for ps.-Methodius was thus the fear that rapidly changing political and social circumstances would encourage many of his co-religionists to convert to Islam." Conversion from Christianity to Islam is indeed a significant subject in the *Apocalypse*. In historical

What is even more important is that the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik constructed the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in 691; its Arabic inscriptions contain clear anti-trinitarian/Christian polemics.¹⁸ In the eyes of some Christians, what was unsuccessfully attempted by Julian the Apostate in the year 363 – the rebuilding of the Temple – was completed by ‘Abd al-Malik, to the clear disadvantage of the Christians.¹⁹ Islam, born as a “Believers’ movement”²⁰ with negotiable specific characteristics at first, had now clearly drawn the line between itself and other religious traditions, even though cross-pollination between the traditions naturally continued over the centuries. This demarcation seems to have been seen first and foremost as a possibility by Pseudo-Methodius (if the dating proffered by Brock and Reinink is correct): whereas during the conquest phase (630s onwards) some, especially Miaphysite, Christian communities might even have welcomed the Muslim conquerors, now it had become clear that the Muslims were the obvious foes of the Christians and they should not be collaborated with. The Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, who crushed his opponent, the rival caliph ruling from the Ḥijāz, Ibn al-Zubayr, in 692, also announced himself on his coinage from the 690s to be the protector and holder of *khilāfat allāh* ‘God’s vice-regency’.²¹

Historical events such as the Muslim conquests and the consolidation of the Muslim rule, especially under the powerful caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, inspired many Jewish and Christian apocalyptists,²² Pseudo-Methodius being one of the most interesting and influential. In the perceptive words of Robert Hoyland, apocalypses

constitute a cognitive and consolatory enterprise, an attempt to render meaningful and endurable a traumatic situation, notably cultural and political oppression by a foreign power, but also the suffering inherent in everyday existence; they therefore remain

reality, this does not seem to have been too pressing a threat, since conversion to Islam was, in the first century of the Islamic era, all but absent. Indeed, the Muslims discouraged or even forbade conversion in many cases. The only clear exception was the slaves of the Muslims, who were, in most cases, urged to convert to Islam. See Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

¹⁸ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 179–183.

¹⁹ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 184.

²⁰ Fred M. Donner, “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community,” *Al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003) 9–53.

²¹ For the coinage, see Clive Foss, *Arab-Byzantine Coins: An Introduction, with a Catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008) 68, 75, 76. The spelling of the Arabic word *khilāfa* is *kh-l-f-h*, just as one would expect. However, for some reason the reading of this word on ‘Abd al-Malik’s coins is usually given as *khal[ī]fa* in the scholarly literature, including Foss. The reading *khal[ī]fa* is very unlikely: early Arabic script very often omits the writing of the medial *ā* but never *ī*. There is no basis to the claim by Stefan Heidemann (“The Evolving Representation of the Early Islamic Empire and Its Religion on Coin Imagery,” in *The Qur’ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu* [ed. A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai, and M. Mars; Leiden: Brill, 2009] 149–195, here 176) that *kh-l-f-h* for *khal[ī]fa* represents a “defective archaic writing,” since Arabic orthography, archaic or otherwise, has never allowed the omission of *ī* in medial position, whereas the omission of the medial *ā* is the rule rather than the exception in the early period. Moreover, it would be rather daring to claim that the words have been misspelled on all the different coins from different mints, especially when the context is official.

²² See Hoyland (*Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 257–335) for a rich collection of Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Muslim apocalyptic texts from the seventh and eighth centuries CE. ‘Abd al-Malik’s taxation and fiscal innovations as well as building activities appear to have stirred many non-Muslims to compose apocalyptic narratives, as noted by Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 263.

popular long after the original crisis has passed. Apocalypses may, in addition, serve a paraenetic function, a plea to the faithful not to weaken in the face of present-day trials, but to hold out for impending deliverance.²³

Since the Syriac *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius is extant in only a few manuscripts, the Greek and Latin translations sometimes help us understand the text of the *Apocalypse*. The work, especially in its later translations, proved to be a widely read apocalyptic text and shaped how the Christians saw Muslims, called the Sons of Ishmael in the work. The person who wrote the Syriac original was most likely a Miaphysite living in or near Singara (Arabic Sinjār), a town in eastern Mesopotamia that was under Muslim rule.²⁴

The *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius is divided into two parts, the first being a historical survey from the Creation until the Muslim conquests and the second being the eschatological part proper that also includes an account of the King of the Greeks (that is, Byzantines) who emerges after the Muslim conquests just before the era of the Antichrist. The Muslims, “the barbarian tyrants”²⁵ coming from Yathrib (Medina),²⁶ are depicted as a great affliction:

Until the time of wrath, [the Sons of Ishmael] will ride upon boasting and wrapped in arrogance. They will seize the entrances of the North, the roads of the East, and ocean’s crossings. Men, livestock, animals, and birds will be yoked to the yoke of their enslavement. The oceans’ waters will become enslaved to them.²⁷

Then, suddenly, the King of the Greeks arises and readies to defend the Christians. He is not named or described in detail. In addition to Heraclius, he shares features of Alexander the Great, Constantine, and Jovian.²⁸ What is more, in the genealogy of Pseudo-Methodius “the kingdoms of Macedonia, Greece, and Rome are joined with one another by the common ancestress Kūshyat, an Ethiopian princess,”²⁹ in a reference to Psalm 68:31, “Kush will surrender to God,” meaning, in the interpretation of Pseudo-Methodius, that Kush or his descendant will hand over power to God and usher in His second coming. A truly remarkable king, then, with noble pedigree, who is clearly the best candidate to defend the Christians threatened by the Muslim invasion, Daniel’s (11:15) “forces of the south.”³⁰ The career of the King of the Greeks is all about warfare: his main aim is to defeat the

²³ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 257.

²⁴ On the author, see, e.g., Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 263–267; Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 112–116; Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 156–169.

²⁵ Reinink (“Ps.-Methodius,” 150 n. 4) notes that this carries a very pregnant meaning in Pseudo-Methodius: the Muslims are both this-worldly as well as Biblical/eschatological tyrants.

²⁶ For some reason, Medina is usually called by its pre-Islamic name, Yathrib, in the Arabic apocalyptic literature too; see D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 172–173. This might imply a very early provenance for the Arabic apocalyptic narratives.

²⁷ Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, transl. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 120.

²⁸ Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 113; Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 170–171.

²⁹ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 165.

³⁰ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 167.

Muslims and to serve as the redeemer of the Christians.³¹ He slays Muslims not only in Syria and Mesopotamia but also in their heartland at the Red Sea (that is, the Hijaz).

After the Muslims have been overcome, a menacing new force appears in the north, but it too is defeated (with some help from an angel): “these nations that will come out of the north eat human flesh and drink animals’ blood like water... But after one week of affliction, all of them will be devastated in the Valley of Joppa.”³² Then, the *Apocalypse* narrates that the King of the Greeks goes to Jerusalem and rests there for ten and a half years, after which the Antichrist appears:

As soon as the Son of Destruction [the Antichrist] will be revealed, the king of the Greeks will ascend and stand upon Golgotha. He will bring the holy cross and place it where it was fastened when it bore Christ. The king of the Greeks will place his diadem on the top of the holy cross, stretch his two hands out to heaven, and hand the kingdom over to God the Father. The holy cross will be raised to heaven and the royal crown with it. For the holy cross upon which Christ was crucified (he was crucified for the salvation of all who believe in him) is the symbol that will appear prior to our Lord’s coming so as to shame unbelievers.³³

The King of the Greeks thus submits his power to the Lord and becomes the Last Roman Emperor. Here the apocalypticist is perhaps influenced by 1 Corinthians 15:24 where Jesus hands over power to God the Father.³⁴ The importance of the King of the Greeks is thus underlined, making his and Jesus’ relationship comparable to that of Jesus the Son and God the Father. The apocalypticist might also be influenced by the *Romance of Julian the Apostate*, in which Jovian orders the army to put the crown that used to belong to the pagan Julian on the Cross: “put the crown that is in your hands on top of the Cross, and come, let us implore Christ by the worship of His Cross for peace and sustenance of your kingdom.”³⁵

However, in the *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius, the battle against the Antichrist is not over yet. The *Apocalypse* ends:

For this Son of Destruction will enter Jerusalem, dwell in God’s temple, and pretend to be like God. But he is a mortal man... At the coming of our Lord from heaven,³⁶ he will be handed over to the Gehenna of fire and to the outer darkness. There he, along with all those who believed in him, will be amid weeping and the gnashing of teeth. But as for us, may our lord Jesus Christ consider us worthy of his heavenly kingdom, along with all

³¹ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 175–176, opposes: “Thus ps.-Methodius’ last Greek king does not represent the figure of a messianic warrior-king borrowed from or competing with the late Jewish idea of a Messiah-Savior; rather he represents the figure of the idealized Christian emperor in conformity with Constantine, Constantius, and especially Jovian, as known from tradition.” However, in my opinion the King of the Greeks combines these two functions: he is both a warrior-king and a Christian emperor.

³² Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, transl. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 126.

³³ Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, transl. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 127.

³⁴ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 154.

³⁵ *Romance of Julian the Apostate*, transl. Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 172.

³⁶ According to the Greek version, Christ “will arrive on the clouds of heaven with heavenly glory”; Garstad: *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, 69.

who do his will. Let us offer glory, honor, adoration, and exaltation now and always, for ever and ever. Amen.³⁷

Let us recapitulate the elements in the *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius:

- a) an eschatological figure, not identical with Jesus, fights and defeats the enemies of the believers;
- b) this eschatological figure, the King of the Greeks, rules from Jerusalem; in the north, a new enemy (often identified with the peoples of Gog and Magog) emerges but is defeated;
- c) the last battle against the Antichrist takes place in Jerusalem;
- d) the Cross ascends to heaven;
- e) the kingdom of the Messiah comes.

We will see that most of these elements are also found in Muslim apocalyptic texts, probably signifying a borrowing from the King of the Greeks legend (since the Muslim apocalypses are later), even if the interpretation is very different.³⁸ It should be noted that the Arabic apocalyptic works do not consist of one long but several short narratives (in Arabic, *akhbār*, sing. *khbar*) that are from a couple of lines to a couple of pages in length. The elements a)–e) mentioned above do not emerge in one Arabic narrative but are scattered over different textual units. This is due to the Arabic *khbar* form that dominated all sorts of Arabic literature (historiography, belles-lettres, prophetic dicta) and was not, therefore, peculiar to Arabic apocalyptic texts only.

The elements are also attested in other Christian apocalyptic texts, such as the *Edessene Apocalypse*,³⁹ heavily dependent on Pseudo-Methodius and dated soon after it, and the *Apocalypse of the John the Little* of the early eighth century or thereabouts.⁴⁰ Both texts are probably Miaphysite and certainly anti-Muslim, similar to Pseudo-Methodius's *Apocalypse*. Interestingly enough, in the *Edessene Apocalypse*, after the defeat of the Muslims, the northern peoples of Gog and Magog⁴¹ will be gathered by God in Mecca, of all places, and stoned to annihilation by angels.⁴² In the *Apocalypse of the John the Little*, the Muslims, called the “people of the land of the South,” are contrasted with the “man of the North,” a warrior-king who can be identified as the Byzantine emperor.⁴³ On his appearance, “the Lord shall cause the spirit of the South to return to [the] place from whence [it] came

³⁷ Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse*, transl. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 128–129.

³⁸ David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002) 2, notes that the borrowing probably happened in an oral milieu. He mentions elsewhere (p. 3) that Christians also borrowed material from Muslims.

³⁹ Transl. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 131–138.

⁴⁰ Transl. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 146–155.

⁴¹ On Gog and Magog more generally, see Emeri van Donzel and Andrea Schmidt (eds.), *Gog and Magog in Early Syriac and Islamic Sources: Sallam's Quest for Alexander's Wall* (Brill: Leiden, 2009).

⁴² *Edessene Apocalypse*, transl. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 136.

⁴³ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 269–270.

forth.”⁴⁴ In the rather late *Apocalypse of Sergius Bahira* (probably written in the early ninth century), the Last Roman Emperor is likened to a “resplendent chariot,”⁴⁵ which will rule for one and a half weeks,⁴⁶ that is, ten and a half years, as in Pseudo-Methodius. In some Coptic and Greek apocalypses of the eighth and ninth centuries, the Last Roman Emperor appears as a lion cub,⁴⁷ which is a reference to the Byzantine emperor Leo III, who reigned 717–741. But the development of the Last Roman Emperor figure in the later Christian apocalyptic is not the main concern of this article. Rather we will now turn to Muslim apocalyptic and trace the similarities between the Last Roman Emperor and a Muslim eschatological warrior, the Mahdī.

The Mahdī in Muslim eschatology

The first specimens of Arabic Islamic apocalyptic narratives can probably be traced to the seventh and eighth centuries CE, although all the extant collections stem from the ninth century or later.⁴⁸ They most likely first circulated in an oral form before they were written down; dating the layers of the Arabic apocalyptic material with any precision is difficult or impossible but many apocalyptic cycles are very early.⁴⁹ The most important early collection of Arabic apocalyptic texts is the *Kitāb al-Fitan* by Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād al-Marwazī (d. 843 CE),⁵⁰ though the ninth-century prophetic dicta literature (Hadith) also contain important accounts.⁵¹ As has been noted in the previous scholarship, Muslim apocalyptic shares motifs and themes with Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and is most likely in many instances dependent on them.⁵² It will be suggested here that the King of the Greeks figure also affected some Muslim apocalyptic narratives. In passing, it can be noted that Zoroastrian apocalyptic literature written in Middle Persian perhaps also affected Muslim apocalyptic, and the eschatological figures Shōshyans (Avestan Saoshyant) and Shāh Vahrām might have served as models for the Muslim Mahdī.⁵³ This suggestion will be left for others to explore.

⁴⁴ *Apocalypse of John the Little*, ed. and transl. J. Rendel Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles together with the Apocalypses of Each One of Them* (Cambridge: CUP, 1900) 38.

⁴⁵ This is a reference to Ezekiel 1:15–21 and/or Daniel 7:9.

⁴⁶ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 272, 276.

⁴⁷ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 295.

⁴⁸ For early Muslim apocalyptic writing, see the studies by Suliman Bashear, David Cook, Michael Cook, Ofer Livne-Kafri, Wilferd Madelung, and Hayrettin Yücesoy (see References, below).

⁴⁹ Even earlier than the analysis of the chains of transmission (*isnāds*) would indicate; Bashear, “Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars,” 173; Michael Cook, “Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions,” *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies* 1 (1992) 23–47.

⁵⁰ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993).

⁵¹ Al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* contains a chapter called *kitāb al-fitan*, “the book of tribulations [during civil wars or at the end of times].” Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* has *kitāb al-fitan wa-ashrāt al-sā‘a*, “the book of tribulations and the portents of the eschaton.” Both chapters include some eschatological narratives, though they are not as detailed as those of Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād and are not discussed here. Furthermore, Jerusalem does not feature as an eschatological location in the traditions of those two collections.

⁵² See, e.g., D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, index, Christian apocalyptic (s.v.).

⁵³ E.g., Sean W. Anthony, “The Mahdī and the Treasures of al-Ṭālaqān,” *Arabica* 59 (2012) 459–483; Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism: Volume I, the Early Period* (third impression, Leiden: Brill, 1996) 234–235; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 321–328.

Muslim apocalyptic contains different eschatological figures, such as the Sufyānī, the Qaḥṭānī, the Maṣṣūr, the Maḥdī (Arabic *al-mahdī* ‘Rightly Guided’),⁵⁴ and the Messiah (Arabic *al-masīḥ*), the last two being the most important ones. All of these have different characteristics dependent on the apocalyptic narrative chosen. I will concentrate on the Maḥdī and the Messiah here.⁵⁵ Identifying the Messiah is easy enough, since most texts equate him with Jesus (‘Īsā ibn Maryam). As to the Maḥdī, he is some kind of a precursor and helper of the Messiah.⁵⁶ The Maḥdī does not feature in the Qur’ān, even if the latter may contain, among other material, “powerful apocalyptic teaching.”⁵⁷ Who, then, is this Maḥdī of the Muslim tradition?

Answering this is not straightforward, since the characteristics of the Maḥdī are “taken from a wide variety of messianic figures, including regional and tribal models, that were available during the first centuries of Islam.”⁵⁸ In general however, it can be said that the Maḥdī is a figure appearing at the end of times – called in Arabic *al-sā‘a* ‘the moment; eschaton’ – and, according to a recurring phrase, “he will fill the earth with justice as it has been filled with injustice” (*yamla ‘uhā qisṭan ka-mā muli ‘at jawran*).⁵⁹ He is a youth⁶⁰ with beautiful face and curved nose.⁶¹ It is often stated in the traditions that the Maḥdī shares the name with the Prophet of Islam, that is, Muḥammad.⁶² He is also the descendant of the Prophet and shares some of his characteristics with him.⁶³ This could be compared to the Zoroastrian eschatological figure, Shōshyans son of Zoroaster, or the Jewish Messiah son of David. In many ways, the Maḥdī is the Prophet Muḥammad resurrected.⁶⁴ (It might be

⁵⁴ The title brings to one’s mind the first four caliphs, called *al-rāshidūn*, also signifying “the Rightly Guided.” A general introduction to the subject is Wilferd Madelung, “al-Mahdī,” In: B. Lewis et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, V 1230–1238.

⁵⁵ On the other figures, see D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, index (s.vv.).

⁵⁶ In some passages it is said that the Maḥdī and Jesus (‘Īsā ibn Maryam) are one and the same; see, e.g., al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, ed. Abū ‘Umar Niḍāl ‘Īsā al-‘Abūshī (Amman: Bayt al-Afkār al-Dawliyya, n.d.) 265–266. It is very difficult to say with any certainty what to make of these traditions. Either they reflect an earlier stage of eschatological speculation, where there was only one eschatological figure, Jesus, or a later stage, where two different eschatological figures were seen as a problem to be done away with by some scholars. The traditions stating that “there is no Maḥdī but Jesus” did not, in any case, become mainstream. I would venture to suggest that the eschatological figure Maḥdī is an early and original Islamic innovation (even if the Maḥdī received characteristics from other eschatological figures) and separate from Jesus. Traditions stating that Jesus is the one and only Maḥdī could be interpreted as having been circulated by Christian converts to Islam, for example.

⁵⁷ Livne-Kafri, “Is there a Reflection of the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius in Muslim Tradition?” p. 110. The “apocalyptic teaching” of the Qur’ān does not contain allusions to eschatological events happening in history; rather, it is ahistorical.

⁵⁸ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 137–138.

⁵⁹ E.g. al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 251.

⁶⁰ This is often emphatically stated: *yab ‘athu allāhu minnā ahl al-bayt ghulāman shābban ḥadathan*, approximately: “God will send from among us, the People of the House, a young man, in the springtime of his life, a youth” (al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 256). In other narratives, he is rather older, 51 or 52 years of age (al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 262).

⁶¹ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 254; a curved nose is often considered a mark of handsomeness in the Arabic literature.

⁶² Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 227.

⁶³ In al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 255, it is stated that the Prophet said concerning the Maḥdī: *khuluquhu khuluqī*, “his character is [the same as] my character.”

⁶⁴ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 141–142.

noted, in this connection, that the Prophet himself, who lived and died a mortal man, does not feature in Muslim apocalyptic at all.)⁶⁵

The Mahdī emerges, according to most narratives, in Mecca at a time of internal strife⁶⁶ but, after putting an end to the Muslim civil war, goes to Jerusalem, the capital of both Christian and Muslim apocalyptic. He fights the enemies of the believers in the battles of the last days (Arabic *fītan*, *malāḥim*).⁶⁷ The most impressive enemy is the Byzantines,⁶⁸ even though other nations, such as the Turks, feature too. The enemies also include the Antichrist (*al-dajjāl*). At this junction, Jesus appears, and the Mahdī surrenders power to him. Jesus then destroys all crosses and kills pigs (clear anti-Christian polemics).⁶⁹ After all this, the non-Muslims are either annihilated or convert to Islam.⁷⁰ The believers triumph. It is the moment of the resurrection, Last Judgement, and afterlife. In one narrative, it is said that Jesus will stay on earth forty years, after which God

will send a peaceful wind that will take the spirit of [Jesus] son of Mary and the spirits of the believers with him. The rest of the people [that is, the unbelievers] will remain, not knowing a Lord, not having anyone to thank. They will stay [like that] as long as God wants. [Then] the eschaton (*al-sāʿa*) will engulf them, and they will be the worst of the creation.⁷¹

There were a number of people in the history of early Islam who claimed to be or were deemed Mahdīs: among others, the “anti-caliph” Ibn al-Zubayr (d. 692),⁷² the rather vague proto-Shīʿī figure Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafiyya (d. 700),⁷³ the pious Umayyad caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 720),⁷⁴ the first ʿAbbāsīd caliph Abū al-ʿAbbās (d. 754),⁷⁵ the Ḥasanid rebel Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdallāh “al-Nafs al-Zakiyya” (d. 762)⁷⁶ and the third ʿAbbāsīd caliph, whose regnal title was, quite simply, al-Mahdī (d. 785) as well as

⁶⁵ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 109.

⁶⁶ In a report in al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 256–257, the factional fighting breaks out during the pilgrimage rites on Mt. ʿArafā near Mecca.

⁶⁷ The Arabic word *fītan* can mean all sorts of seditions, discords, civil wars, internal strife, and temptations, including the battles of the last days. The word *malāḥim* denotes especially the eschatological battles between the Muslims and the Byzantines; see Bashear, “Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars,” 180.

⁶⁸ In one tradition it is said that “the hour [eschaton] will come with the Byzantines (being) more numerous than others,” translated in Bashear, “Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars,” 191. For examples of traditions on the eschatological battles between the Muslims and the Byzantines, see al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 281–284.

⁶⁹ E.g., al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 320.

⁷⁰ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 264.

⁷¹ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 277.

⁷² Madelung, “ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Mahdī.”

⁷³ Madelung, “al-Mahdī” V, 1231.

⁷⁴ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 265.

⁷⁵ He claimed to be *al-mahdī* in his own inscriptions, at least in a milestone from Northern Jordan dated 752–3 CE and in a building inscription of the Great Mosque of Ṣanʿā dated 753–4 CE; see Khaled al-Jbour, “The Discovery of the First Abbasid Milestone in ʿBilād al-Shām,” *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 10 (2001) 171–176; Eugen Mittwoch, “Eine arabische Bauinschrift aus dem Jahre 136 H.,” *Orientalia* 4 (1935): 235–238.

⁷⁶ On his revolt, see most recently Amikam Elad, *The Rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in 145/762* (Brill: Leiden, 2015).

numerous Shī‘ī (especially *ghulāt*) rebels.⁷⁷ With hindsight we can say that none of them initiated the end-times. Furthermore, while all these historical individuals affected the Mahdī conception to some extent, the Mahdī in Muslim eschatological literature is first and foremost a literary character. It is to this literary creation that we must now turn.

Shared components

A brief general description of the Mahdī in Muslim apocalyptic was given above. Let us look more closely and see if there are clear and discernible similarities in Arabic apocalyptic texts with the King of the Greeks motif of the Christian apocalyptic, especially Pseudo-Methodius. It has to be remembered that the Arabic texts are short, disjointed and often contradictory narratives, and the characters in them are complex.

As to motif a), *an eschatological figure, not identical with Jesus*, we have a clear parallel for the King of the Greeks in Arabic apocalyptic texts, namely the Mahdī. Both reign from Jerusalem and both are eschatological warriors whose main purpose is to defeat the enemies of the believers. Indeed, it is argued in this article that the Muslims took over the King of the Greeks figure in the form of the Mahdī, though it must be noted that the Mahdī is a multifaceted character with many different, sometimes opposing, descriptions in Muslim apocalyptic.⁷⁸ Crucially, the Mahdī is usually depicted as arising in Mecca as a ruler of the Muslims but then migrating to Jerusalem and ruling from there.⁷⁹

Whether or not the fixation with Jerusalem in Christian and Muslim apocalyptic reveals Jewish antecedents is a debated question. G. J. Reinink opines that

the fact that ps.-Methodius makes the Last Greek Emperor reside in Jerusalem after the period of devastating invasions of the eschatological peoples, and that he makes him abdicate on Golgotha after the appearance of the Antichrist, is not to be explained by his dependence on late Jewish traditions about a Messiah whose activities centered on Mount Zion, but is meant rather to demonstrate that Jerusalem had become and will always remain the City of Christendom.⁸⁰

However, I would be willing to allow for many different influences on Pseudo-Methodius and not exclude the possibility – even probability – of borrowing from Jewish eschatological thought. This applies to Muslim apocalyptic as well, either directly from Jewish sources or indirectly, through Christian apocalyptic. Jewish conceptions of the Messiah share a number of similarities with the figures of both the Last Roman Emperor and the Mahdī: the Jewish Messiah is, first of all, a this-worldly warrior-king and, second, he rules from Jerusalem, maintaining the kingdom of God.⁸¹ The similarities to the Last

⁷⁷ Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

⁷⁸ In Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, for instance, the description of the signs, characteristics, and biography (!) of the Mahdī span some thirty pages: see pp. 202–234. In addition, the Mahdī features in some role in most of the pages of the work.

⁷⁹ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 211–219.

⁸⁰ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 184.

⁸¹ For Jewish conceptions of the Messiah, see, e.g., Antti Laato: *A Star is Rising: The Historical Development of the Old Testament Royal Ideology and the Rise of the Jewish Messianic Expectations* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts,” in *The*

Roman Emperor and the Mahdī are obvious. What is more, in some Jewish eschatological narratives, the king-Messiah (Messiah ben David) is preceded by the warrior-Messiah (Messiah ben Joseph/Ephraim), which rather well corresponds with the Last Roman Emperor–Jesus or the Mahdī–Jesus pairs. In my opinion, one would be hard pressed to deny the probable influence of the Jewish Messiah concept on Christian and Muslim eschatological speculations. Lawrence Schiffman sums up the apocalyptic material in the Babylonian Talmud as follows:

Extremely important to the apocalyptic view in the Babylonian Talmud is the idea that a messiah, son of Joseph, would be slain in the eschatological battle... Many of these notions are simply a restatement of what we have already seen in the rabbinic corpus. What is new is the full-scale re-entry of the old notions of apocalyptic and utopian messianism. We hear of such notions as the war of Gog and Magog, the various ages (or stages) of the world, and that there will be a great struggle, as it were, a Day of the Lord, before the coming of the messiah... There are indications here of strong apocalyptic tendencies. There is the legend of the two messiahs, that of David and Joseph.⁸²

According to G. J. Reinink,⁸³ the King of the Greeks of Pseudo-Methodius is inspired, not by the Jewish Messiah, but by the Christian king Jovian as he appears in the Syriac *Romance of Julian the Apostate*, even if the enemy of Greco-Roman paganism is replaced in Pseudo-Methodius by Muslim heterodoxy (of which Pseudo-Methodius does not give details):⁸⁴

And he (i.e. Jovian) exalted and did honor to the churches and restored to them the treasures which Julian, the wicked, had taken from them. And he freed from tax the holy covenant of God, and he wrote letters of peace, of reconciliation and pardon, of honor and exaltation, to all the churches of his realm. He wrote letters even to other governments concerning the peace of the churches and the rest of the Christians. And he purified the kingdom of the Romans from the stink of the sacrifices of paganism, and he overthrew their tables and destroyed their altars, he banished their erroneous doctrines, destroyed their houses of assembly, and removed their treasures to the treasures of the Church.⁸⁵

Be that as it may, it is perhaps best to leave the question somewhat open and, especially, take into consideration the possibility of different literary and historical characters behind the King of the Greeks of Pseudo-Methodius.

To return to Christian/Muslim apocalyptic and motif a), it was mentioned above that in the *Edessene Apocalypse*, Gog and Magog are depicted as being gathered in Mecca by God and stoned to death by angels. The holy city of Mecca naturally plays a significant role in Muslim apocalyptic too. It is said, for instance, that the Arab tribes will be divided into

Cambridge History of Judaism IV: The Late Roman–Rabbinic Period (ed. Steven T. Katz; Cambridge: CUP, 2006) 1053–1072; David Novak, “Jewish Eschatology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (ed. Jerry L. Walls; Oxford: OUP, 2008) 113–131, here 124–126.

⁸² Schiffman, “Messianism and Apocalypticism,” 1068.

⁸³ Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 170–171.

⁸⁴ Reinink (“Ps.-Methodius,” 176 n. 117) remarks about this: “However, we should not conclude too quickly from ps.-Methodius’ silence in this respect that he is not familiar with at least some religious conceptions of nascent Islam.”

⁸⁵ *Romance of Julian the Apostate*, transl. Reinink, “Ps.-Methodius,” 171.

opposing parties and start fighting inside the sacred enclave of Mecca, clearly a horrid idea to the apocalyptists.⁸⁶ At this moment, “after the people have already given up hope for his emergence because the tribulation has grown long,”⁸⁷ the Mahdī will appear with a small but capable force of some 300 followers to end the secession.⁸⁸ After this tribulation between the Muslim believers, the Mahdī will emigrate to Jerusalem, the messianic and apocalyptic capital.⁸⁹ This is the emigration (*hijra*, *muhājara*) of the Mahdī, whereas the Prophet’s emigration was from Mecca to Medina.⁹⁰ This is often connected with some sort of *fitna*, tribulation or civil war, in Syria that the Mahdī goes to quell.⁹¹ Remarkably according to some narratives, not only does the Mahdī emigrate, but the Prophet’s bones and the Ka’ba are also transported from Mecca to Jerusalem!⁹² During these days, natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes or *khasf*, the ground swallowing people, occur; what is more, a monstrous creature called *al-dābba* ‘the crawling beast’ appears in the East and starts killing people, although making a distinction between believers and unbelievers.⁹³

It is said that there will be a caliph (that is, the Mahdī) in Jerusalem and an anti-caliph elsewhere,⁹⁴ and people should only give allegiance to the one in Jerusalem.⁹⁵ When the Mahdī has emigrated to Jerusalem, he has with him a bigger force of 12,000 followers.⁹⁶ He will fight the Byzantines and gain the Ark of the Covenant (*tābūt al-sakīna*) in which the (original) Torah of Moses and Gospel of Jesus are.⁹⁷ Above it was said that the rule of the King of Greeks lasts ten and half years in the text of Pseudo-Methodius; in Muslim apocalyptic, the rule of the Mahdī usually lasts seven years,⁹⁸ sometimes five, eight, or nine.⁹⁹ Whatever the length of his rule, these are happy times. In the words of the Greek Pseudo-Methodius, “there will be a great peace and quiet upon the earth such as has not been nor will be until the last [day] at the end of the ages.”¹⁰⁰ According to one Muslim apocalyptic tradition, “the inhabitants of the heaven [that is, angels], the inhabitants of the earth, birds, wild animals and fish in the sea will rejoice because of him [the Mahdī]; the watering places will become abundant during his reign (*fī dawlatihi*) and the rivers longer, the earth will multiply its fruit, and treasures will be unearthed [everywhere].”¹⁰¹

⁸⁶ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 211.

⁸⁷ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 213.

⁸⁸ Sometimes it is said that despite emerging in Mecca, the Mahdī is born in Medina, Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 226.

⁸⁹ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 172.

⁹⁰ The concept of *hijra* is often connected with warfare and messianic hopes in Arabic literature. Early Muslims called themselves *muhājirūn*, Emigrants/Settlers, see Lindstedt, “Muhājirūn as a Name for the First/Seventh Century Muslims.”

⁹¹ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 216.

⁹² D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 177.

⁹³ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārīda fī al-Fitan*, 269.

⁹⁴ Sometimes this is explicitly identified as Damascus; Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 224.

⁹⁵ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 218.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 233; D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 144 n. 30.

¹⁰⁰ Garstad, *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, 61.

¹⁰¹ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārīda fī al-Fitan*, 270.

In some Arabic apocalyptic texts the Mahdī will not give the rule directly to Jesus but will instead die before the latter's appearance.¹⁰² However, this is not the norm: usually the Mahdī and Jesus are alive at the same time, at least for a little while.

Pseudo-Methodius only mentions the peoples of the North, without giving any names, as a new menace, but usually in Christian and Muslim apocalyptic these are identified as the peoples of Gog and Magog,¹⁰³ which brings us to motif b), *Gog and Magog emerge but are defeated*. As stated above, Arabic literature in general consists of short accounts (*khavar*) that are usually not explicitly connected with each other. For this reason, Gog and Magog are usually not part of a longer narrative that would contain all the elements a)–e). In any case, Gog and Magog, and other peoples of the North, such as Turks and Kurds, form an important part of the Muslim apocalyptic literature.¹⁰⁴ In one narrative, Gog and Magog explicitly threaten Jerusalem after the Dajjāl has attacked there but has been defeated.¹⁰⁵

In one short *khavar*, the sequence of events is as follows: “The first sign [of the eschaton] is [the emergence of] the Byzantines, the second is the Dajjāl [Antichrist], the third is Gog and Magog, and the fourth is Jesus son of Mary.”¹⁰⁶ But often the exact order of what happens is unclear because the Arabic narratives are disjointed.

Element c), *the battles against the Antichrist* in Jerusalem, or sometimes elsewhere,¹⁰⁷ appears frequently in Muslim apocalyptic. As in Christian eschatological writings, the Antichrist, as well as his followers, is depicted as Jewish in most Muslim sources. The Muslim Antichrist, Dajjāl, is portrayed as a master deceiver who succeeds in winning followers by doing all sorts of miracles, very similar to those ascribed to Jesus in both Christian and Muslim literature. The Dajjāl is, then, a *Doppelgänger* of Jesus.¹⁰⁸ In one narrative, it is said:

The Dajjāl brings with him rivers and fruits. He commands the sky to rain and it does. He commands the earth to produce and it does. He has with him a mountain of *tharīd* [a kind of food] on which there are springs of melt butter.¹⁰⁹

Even if the Dajjāl is sometimes connected with other regions, Jerusalem is probably the most important place where his activities take place.¹¹⁰ In one of the accounts, the Dajjāl appears from the sea, besieging Jerusalem with 70,000 Jews as his followers. There are only 20,000 Muslims in Jerusalem, led by the Mahdī. A deep fog descends over Jerusalem but, the next morning, the fog dissolves and Jesus emerges among the Muslim believers. Jesus goes out of Jerusalem to fight the Dajjāl who simply melts upon seeing Jesus. The

¹⁰² Nu‘aym ibn Hammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 239.

¹⁰³ They are also mentioned in the Qur’ān, 18:94 and 21:96.

¹⁰⁴ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 182–188.

¹⁰⁵ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 368.

¹⁰⁶ Nu‘aym ibn Hammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 317.

¹⁰⁷ For the different toponyms mentioned as the origins of the Antichrist, see D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 94.

¹⁰⁸ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 100–101.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārīda fī al-Fitan*, 275.

¹¹⁰ For the importance of Jerusalem in Islam, see Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila’s article in this book.

army of the Dajjāl, consisting of the Jews, are massacred by Jesus and the Muslims after this.¹¹¹

In other apocalyptic narratives, already the Mahdī faces the Dajjāl, but usually this is left for Jesus, who descends from heaven upon the emergence of the Dajjāl, landing in Jerusalem and fighting the Dajjāl.¹¹² Above it was noted that the two holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, feature in Christian apocalyptic as places where the Muslims are utterly crushed. In Muslim apocalyptic, the Dajjāl often threatens the two sacred enclaves but is unable to conquer them.¹¹³ Joppa/Jaffa (Arabic Yāfā), mentioned by Pseudo-Methodius, also plays a role in Muslim eschatology. In one apocalyptic text, the Byzantine forces attack Yāfā, “upon which its people will take refuge in the mountains with their children. [However,] the Muslims will meet them and gain victory over them, killing their king.”¹¹⁴

In Christian apocalyptic, motif d) *the Cross ascends to heaven* is common. This does not occur in Muslim apocalyptic, of course. Rather, the Cross/Crucifix (*al-ṣalīb*) becomes the object of anti-Christian polemics. In the Arabic narratives, it is usually Jesus – descending from heaven to Jerusalem as in Christian apocalyptic – who will break the Cross (or all crosses) and kill the pigs.¹¹⁵ In one tradition, the Byzantines attack the Muslims in Syria and at first seem to be winning. A Byzantine soldier exclaims (hoisting a cross, one assumes): “The Cross has won!” However, a Muslim soldier stands up, breaks the cross and retorts: “God is the one winning.”¹¹⁶

The Christian apocalypses put much weight on element e), *the kingdom of the Messiah comes*. This is not a motif in Muslim apocalyptic because it smacked of Christian millennialist hopes. Rather, it is emphasized that Jesus – even though he is a prophet descending from heaven to Jerusalem – is just a mortal man, a pious Muslim, who will die a natural death after the killing of the Dajjāl and before the Last Judgment.¹¹⁷ Of course, the Muslims also shared the idea of some sort of millennialism, that is, that there will be “a period of peace and righteousness on the earth,”¹¹⁸ associated (in the case of Muslims) with the ascent of the Mahdī and Jesus, but this period is rather short – perhaps a decade – before the resurrection starts and, in any case, the Mahdī and Jesus are not divine figures as such. On the Christian side, the starting point of millennialist thinking was Revelation 20, which mentions two different resurrections separated by a thousand years.¹¹⁹ No Muslim

¹¹¹ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 104, with references to the different versions of the story.

¹¹² D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 167.

¹¹³ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 107, 154–166.

¹¹⁴ Lindstedt, “Muhājirūn,” 71–72.

¹¹⁵ D. Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, 175.

¹¹⁶ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārīda fī al-Fitan*, 271.

¹¹⁷ Marcia Hermansen, “Eschatology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (ed. Tim Winter; Cambridge: CUP, 2008) 308–324, here 317.

¹¹⁸ On (Christian) millennialism, see Timothy P. Weber, “Millennialism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (ed. Jerry L. Walls; Oxford: OUP, 2008) 365–383, quotation from p. 365.

¹¹⁹ There were naturally those early Church Fathers who rejected apocalyptic millennialism. Among them was Augustine of Hippo (354–430), according to whom apocalyptic texts did not primarily deal with historic events; rather, they were allegories; see Weber, “Millennialism” 369–371. Christian millennialism has parallels and antecedents in Jewish messianism. In 4 Ezra, it is said that the Messiah will rule for 400 years,

apocalyptist ever suggested that the righteous rule of the Mahdī or Jesus would last so long: the rule of the Mahdī is usually stated to be seven years while that of Jesus will be twenty or forty years or thereabouts.¹²⁰ In both Christian and Muslim eschatology, this notion of some sort of messianic reign before the Last Judgment might have been inspired by the figure of the Jewish Messiah.¹²¹

Roughly speaking, it can be said that the King of the Greeks is replaced by the Mahdī in the Muslim apocalyptic texts treated here. Both conquer and rule from Jerusalem and act in very similar roles, as precursors and aids to Jesus. Both the King of the Greeks and the Mahdī give the authority to Jesus, who is the leader of the believers after that. The Antichrist is defeated by Jesus. Both Christian and Muslim apocalyptic mention the peoples of Gog and Magog as harbingers of destruction. It depends on the particular apocalypse how much havoc God and Magog are able to wreak and at what juncture they appear. The Cross features in very different functions in Christian and Muslim apocalyptic. In Christian texts, the True Cross ascends to heaven, at which moment Jesus appears from heaven. In Muslim apocalypses, Jesus himself destroys the Cross(es), which, of course, has a clear anti-Christian purpose: Jesus is one of the Muslims and a mortal, not God in flesh as the Christians believe.

Conclusions

The scholarship on early Islam has undergone something of a paradigm shift in recent decades, resulting in a widely shared notion that the emergence Islam did not mean the end of antiquity and the beginning of the medieval period; rather, Islam was a distinctive part of the late antique world of the Near East. The history of the Qur'ān, as well, should be seen in that light.¹²²

I have suggested in this article that the Arab-Islamic apocalyptic writings should be compared with their Christian precursors and contemporaries, especially those written in Syriac. Many of the motifs appearing in Christian apocalypses were taken over by the Muslims, even though the latter did not compose long apocalyptic narratives but, instead, preferred a rather different, and shorter, *khabar* form. (Needless to say, borrowings and interdependence do not lessen the value of literature in any language or culture.) Furthermore, it seems that they shared the same eschatological worldview as the Christians, even if their interpretation was significantly different. Ultimately, the Last Roman Emperor character also drew on earlier precursors, most importantly, perhaps, the Jewish Messiah. It appears that in late antique eschatological speculation, members of the three Abrahamic

after which all humans, including the Messiah, will perish; Schiffman, "Messianism and Apocalypticism," 1061.

¹²⁰ Al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-Sunan al-Wārida fī al-Fitan*, 318, 321.

¹²¹ Alexander, "The Medieval Legend," 7–8; cf. Reinink ("Ps.-Methodius," 170), according to whom "behind these words lies the concept of peace and restoration by a Christian emperor protecting the Church and Christianity after a period of pagan rule."

¹²² See, in more detail, Lindstedt, "Early Muslims, Pre-Islamic Arabia, and 'Pagans.'"

religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, shared the concept of – and eagerly awaited – a redeeming, but this-worldly, warrior-king. The direction of influence was the following:

The Jewish Messiah -> the Christian Last Emperor -> the Muslim Mahdī

Apocalyptic speculation proffered consolation during conflict, the most pressing concern in the seventh century CE being the war between the Byzantine empire and the Muslim caliphate: the Byzantines feared that the Muslims would conquer even bigger parts of their empire; the Muslims feared that the Byzantines would reconquer the territories in Syria and elsewhere; and, finally, the Near Eastern Jews and Christians watched these developments with increasing anxiety.¹²³ Christians and Muslims awaited the eschatological events to begin; both expected a warrior-king to appear (the King of the Greeks, the Mahdī). Somehow Jerusalem, the Cross, and Jesus would feature in all this. Both Christians and Muslims were certain that they were on the winning side. But the eschaton, much anticipated, proved to be elusive.

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¹²³ Bashear, “Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars.”

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